DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 564 CG 012 835

AUTHOR Meeker, F. B.; La Fong, Carl
TITLE Brokenhearts: Dissolution of Romantic Relationships.
PUB DATE 22 Apr 78
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Affection; *Behavior Patterns; Emotional Experience; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Psychological Patterns; *Rejection; Research Projects; Social Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Romantic Love

ABSTRACT

Results of an investigation examining the dissolution of romantic relationships are analyzed. Men and women (N=105) who had ended romantic relationships were surveyed in structured individual interviews. Commonalities and differences in respondents' perceptions of the experience were examined. Specific tests were made of a corollary to Waller's "principle of least interest" and Wanderer's addiction model of romantic love with respect to past and future expected involvement of Dumpees (those neither initiating nor acting to produce dissolution) and Dumpers. Results are contrasted with those of Rubin's longitudinal sample of dating couples. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

F. B. Meeker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED159564

Brokenhearts: Dissolution of Romantic Relationships

F. B. Meeker and Carl La Fong
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Psychological interest in romantic love has increased in recent years under the impetus of Rubin's (1973) longitudinal studies of dating couples. One finding of the Rubin studies was that about 45% of the couples dissolved their relationships. That is, for these couples the romance ended with a "falling out of love" or dissolution of the relationship, rather than in marriage or some other semi-permanent arrangement. Rubin and his co-workers broadened the scope of their studies to include the termination of romance - from "Liking & Loving" to "Liking, Loving, and Leaving".

Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) identified one of the factors centrally related to staying or leaving as the degree of mutual romantic involvement. The researchers, invoking Blau's (1964) thesis, proposed a sort of balance model in which the romance should remain stable if both partners were about equally involved, but which predicts dissolution with increasing inequality of involvement. Their results seemed to fit the balance formulation.

In a way similar to Hill, et al., the present study considers the degree of romantic involvement as a central predictor of the fate of the romance. Involvement is considered from 3 theoretical viewpoints: One is Waller's (1938) "principle of least interest," which holds that the less involved partner sets the terms of the relationship; second, a simple learning model which casts the fate of romance in terms of punishment and reward; and, third, Wanderer's (1978) behavioral formulation of

CG012835

romantic love as addiction.

In a way slightly different from Hill, et al., the implications of each theoretical model are contrasted against a categorization of respondents as Dumpers, i.e., those initiating or acting to produce dissolution; or Dumpees, i.e., those not initiating dissolution but acting to maintain the romance.

LEAST INTEREST, ROMANTIC LEARNING & ROMANTIC ADDICTION[1]

Principle of Least Interest. Waller was a sociologist interested in the reasons for divorce. Dissolution may result, he suggested, from an intolerable imbalance of power. Power was phrased in terms of involvement: whichever partner is less involved in the marriage, is the one who is able to set its terms. While we may quibble about exact definitions of "degrees of involvement," and other terms, the principle of least interest makes eminently good intuitive sense -- the deeply involved dote; the deeply adored, dictate. Cynical, but cute.

If we remove marriage from consideration, (the heart's desire of a countless multitude) and apply Waller's principle to romantic relationships, (the intellectual desire of a countable few) one implication is that the less involved person is the one who determines whether the relationship will continue or end. That is, according to the principle of least interest, the less involved romantic partner is more able, and more likely to initiate a breakup. The less involved partner, then, is more likely the Dumper; the more involved, more likely the Dumpee.

Romantic Learning. The quality of romance has always been described

[1] Those fixated at the data level may omit this entire section with no loss of continuity, but with a great loss of fun.

as bitter-sweet, as pain and pleasure. The learning formulation transcribes the ancient dichotomy into one of punishment and positive reinforcement. Under full jargon, it sails forth like so: A learning description holds that punishment effects are equivalent for both Dumpers and Dumpees. For Dumpers there is no punishment. Oh, a twinge of quilt may fleet momentarily across her psyche, but it will be rationalized, denied, or sublimated in the next instant. For Dumpees, the punishment of rejection is delayed until well after the initial response of, "falling-in-love." Pain follows long after pleasure, and does not suppress the "in-love" response. For Dumpees, the punishment of being dumped is akin to the punishment of hangover or withdrawal, occurring too long after the initial response to suppress it.[2] For both Dumpers and Dumpees, then, punishment associated with dissolution does nothing to suppress, present or future "falling-in-love."

On the reinforcement side, there is less equity. The learning thesis suggests that the Dumper probably dumped because rewards were not sufficient; and that the Dumpee hung around because, to him, the rewards sufficed. Thus, reinforcement effects would be greater for the Dumpee; and, because of the viscissitudes of romance, intermitantly so, making for great resistance to extinction of the initial "falling-in-love" response, and the continuing, "I-am-in-love." For the Dumpee, then, punishment is delayed, - but reinforcement, while variable, is not and is

[2] The learning model recognizes that the punishment of rejection may have an effect on contiguously occurring behavior, e.g., he may feel a gut-wrenching shudder when (the new) she takes him to dinner in the very diner in which (the old) she dumped him. The point is: delayed punishment does not suppress the initial response, in this case, the response of "falling-in-love."

contingent on the romantic responses which signal continuing romantic involvement. "Falling in love" or, "being in love" can be the S^D which sets the occasion for some of the most bizarre behavior emitted by, and reinforcing to Western man and woman.

So with respect to the recently ended romance, if the Dumpees can perceive their own behavior with verisimilitude, or even accuracy, they ought to report a high degree of involvement, compared to Dumpers. With respect to future involvement, the reinforcement history of Dumpees would lead to a prediction of equally intense or more intense involvement being desired.

Romantic Addiction. Wanderer's behavioral formulation of romantic love as addiction enlarges the learning model. The central modifier is his notion that the "falling-in-love" response is so powerful a reinforcer that it overwhelmes the effect of all other factors - Male, Female, Dumper, Dumpee, etc. Romantic love, he says, is like dope - all love addicts need a love fix, and no addict would dump their connection. If that is so, then Dumpers and Dumpees alike, men and women alike, would want more and more involvement.

The three models are complementary, rather than conflicting. The learning model describes the how of Waller's principle, Wanderer suggests why. In the present study the questions come to these: Do respondents who do not initiate ending the relationship report more involvement in this and future (anticipated) relationships than those who do initiate romantic foreclosure? In our parlance: Will Dumpees report more present and/or future involvement than Dumpers? Or will everyone want more, regardless.

METHOD

50 men and 55 women (not couples) who had ended romantic relationships within the past 90 days were surveyed in structured individual interviews. Respondents were obtained through ads in the university newspaper, referrals, and classroom solicitations. Our respondents (and their partners) were young (median age 20), white, middleclass, and heterosexual.

The survey instrument was organized on a Then-Now basis (pre- and post-breakup) and included a diversity of items from demographics to dreaming.

RESULTS

The median duration of the 105 romances surveyed was 15 months.

Respondents usually described the degree of their initial involvement as, "very involved," or "very much in love" (72%) as opposed to, "close" or just, "involved" (28%). They also reported doing the things stereotypically expected of those in love: They dated frequently, saw each other often, asked others about, and made conversational references to others about their romantic partner, thought of them "constantly" or several times per day, sent them cards on every important occasion, including the monthly anniversary of their first meeting. The one somewhat surprising exception was that only a few respondents (9%) reported having frequent dreams about their beloved.

Frequencies of these behaviors changed significantly after the breakup, except that of asking others about the partner, by McNemar's significance of changes test (Siegel, 1956). McNemar's test concentrates only on changes - those moving from high frequency (everyday to one or

two per week) to low frequency (two or three per month to seldom or never) or vice versa. All significant changes were in the direction from high to low, which may appear to be validation of the obvious, however, nothing about the relationship necessarily demands that the frequency of such behaviors must be in the direction of high to low, and, in fact, there were a few individual anomalies, e.g., a couple who dated more frequently after the breakup.

For about half of our respondents, the breakup happened gradually, building over a period of some time, and, for the other half, suddenly, usually as a result of a final critical incident.

The romantic breakups reported were apparently not the crushing, all-is-lost experience sometimes mentioned in the literature, for example Seeman (1975). Seventy-two percent reported positive feelings about the past romance; 18 percent, negative feelings, with 10 percent indifferent. Whatever negative feelings persisted, they apparently were not directed toward the other individual: 90% reported that they still liked the other person, and slightly over half (53%) said they still loved them. Nearly all respondents (94%) expected they would fall in love again, and 87 percent expected that the intensity of the future romance to be equal to or greater than the past one.

Men and Women, Dumpers and Dumpees

To us, the most interesting male-female difference in the survey is in the relative ranking of factors which are seen by respondents as being important to maintaining a romantic relationship. The respondent was asked to rank the three factors, from a list of seven, which were most important in keeping the relationship together. For the first, second, and third

choices, each factor was ranked by frequency, e.g., if factor number 2 were the first choice of most respondents, it was given a rank of 1; the factor chosen next most frequently as first choice, a rank of 2, and so on. Ranks were then summed down the Choice by Factor matrix, and the column sums were then ranked across the factors (ranking the sum of ranks) providing a summary score of importance of the factor, we hope. Table 1 shows summary scores (ranks) of the seven factors presented to respondents.

Insert Table 1 about here

The data in Table 1 look phoney, we know, and while a scaling analysis which differentially weights first, second, and third choices might provide a finer ordering, the basics, we think, are there. In looking at individual records we found that few women ever rate Sex higher than rank 5, while few men ever rank Sex lower than 4.

If taken seriously, this is, at once, a reflection of stereotypic expectations, and just possibly an underlying cause of the breakup. Men are expected (by women) to be more interested in sex than love, and may even be unable to make the distinction. Women are expected (by men) to highly value love, since they have a great innate need for it; but not in sex, since high sex drive, and interest in sex are masculine traits.

One might predict, then, that respondents would confirm their stereotype - men would rank sex as an important factor in the romance and love as less important, while women would rank love as more important.

If sex and love were not highly important factors, it is likely no conflict would arise even if partners did not agree on how important each factor was: If the seventh factor on your list is not the same as the seventh factor on my list, so what?

The fact is, however, that for our respondents, it is the first factor on the respective lists, the most important, which is mismatched. This difference in perception could lead to conflict, which if not resolved, could in turn lead to breakup.

We also looked at possible sex differences as they might interact with the Dumper-Dumpee dimension. Hill et al. cite three studies in which there were a preponderance of female-initiated breakups. In explanation these authors suggest that the women might have been less involved in the relationship - the Waller principle again - however, their data did not support such an explanation. In the present study there was no significant difference between the numbers of female, vs. male, Dumpers, although significantly more self-reported Dumpers were interviewed. Our results also failed to support the Waller principle with respect to the recently ended involvement. Dumpers were neither more nor less involved than Dumpees. Likewise degree of involvement prior to breakup did not differ between sexes. With respect to degree of involvement in future anticipated romances, our respondents showed no differences across the Dumper-Dumpee, or sex dimensions. The only significant difference is in the degree of future involvement. Both male and female, Dumper and Dumpee, anticipate being involved to an equal or greater degree, not less, in future romances. Burnt children who do not fear the fire. Romantic love addicts with an increasing habit.

REFERENCES

Blau, P. M. Exchange and power in social life. New York: Wiley, 1964.

Hill, C. T., Rubin, Z., and Peplau, L. Breakups before marriage: The end of 103 affairs. Journal of Social Issues, 1976, 32, 147-168.

Rubin, Z. Liking and Loving. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1973.

Seeman, M. V. Psychotherapy of love loss, Journal of Psychotherapy, 1975, 29(4) 558-566.

Siegel, S. Nonparametric statistics. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956.

Waller, W. The Family: A dynamic interpretation. New York: Dryden, 1938.

Wanderer, Z. Personal communication. Untitled book, in press. 1978.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank C. Lewis, T. Ramos, S. Barkdoll, D. Barkdoll, J. Diaz for assistance in data processing, and for interviewing assistance, K. Sharp, L. Vandagriff, G. Powers, L. Borba, L. Morris, and J. Williams.

Table 1. Rank Importance of Factors by Sex.

MEN		WOMEN	
RANK	FACTOR	RANK	FACTOR
1	Sex	2	Love
2.5	Meeting Mutual Needs	2	Meeting Mutual Needs
2.5	Similarity of Attitudes & Beliefs	2	Similarity of Attitudes & Beliefs
5	Helping Each Other	4	Helping Each Other
5	Love	5	Sex
5	Physical Attractiveness	6	Physical Attractiveness
7	Money	7	Money